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ABSTRACT

The polarity of gender is perhaps the most important shaping force in the nineties in the growth and change of education and educational theory. Many critics have argued that there is a masculine bias at the heart of most academic disciplines and methodologies. Feminist approaches, conversely, are viewed as intuitive, expressive, and unscientific. In composition pedagogy, feminist approaches are most concerned with community and process, unlike more scientific, and thus more masculine, methods. The traditional, masculinist approach presents a model of writing as product, which is inherently authoritarian. Such a model draws upon a male model of intellectual development whereby students are empty vessels waiting to be filled with true knowledge, rather than active participants in discovery and learning. This model, however, encourages "separate" knowing, which is learning how to think in order to win the academic game, and different from true understanding. The "connected" teacher, conversely, shares openly her struggles, successes, and failures in writing, allowing students to see the imperfections and botched attempts. Such a feminist, or "mid-wife," teacher stresses experience as a basic part of learning and strives to establish a community of writers. Another common format of feminist pedagogy is peer-group work. One freshman student's altered response after engaging in group discussion illustrates the positive effects of feminist methods. The feminist/midwife model, based on trust, cooperation, and social responsibility, will best serve the global community of the coming years. (Twenty-two references are attached.) (HB)

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Connection, Trust, and Social Responsibility: A Feminist Pedagogy

The polarity of gender, of male-female, is perhaps the most important shaping force of the nineties in the growth and change of education and educational theory, if not in the culture as a whole (Capra 12). The stereotype of women as emotional, intuitive, irrational has contributed to the devaluation of women and the elevation of men who, on the contrary, are seen as impersonal, objective and rational, qualities more highly valued in technologically-oriented cultures where scientific discovery translates itself into power and money. Such attitudes have been particularly insidious in the halls of academe where the future is forged from the values instilled, in part, by the academician.

That there is a masculine bias at the "very heart of most academic disciplines, methodologies, and theories" (Belenky et al. 6) has been persuasively argued by several feminist writers in the past two decades (Bernard 1973; Gilligan 1979, 1982; Harding and Hintikka 1983; Keller 1978, 1985; Janssen-Jurreit 1980; Langland and Gove 1981; Sherman and Beck 1979). And the discipline of English is no exception. In terms of literary criticism, "Marxism and structuralism see themselves as privileged critical discourse, and preempt the claim to superior places in the

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hierarchy of critical approaches. A key word in each system is 'science'; both claim to be sciences of literature, and repudiate the personal, fallible, interpretative reading" (Showalter 139). Feminist criticism, on the other hand, is perceived as lacking in honesty and rigor (Showalter 126), in definition and coherence (Kolodny 149). These perceptions sharply reflect the polarized stereotypes of men and women in our culture. As Showalter explains, the "new sciences of the text based on linguistics, computers, genetic structuralism, deconstructionism, neoformalism and deformalism, affective stylistics, and psychoaesthetics, have offered literary critics the opportunity to demonstrate that the work they do is as manly and aggressive as nuclear physics--not intuitive, expressive, and feminine [like feminist criticism], but strenuous, rigorous, impersonal, and virile" (140).

In terms of composition, the same holds true. Theories and models derived from a science, like cognitive psychology or linguistics, argue their superiority over what have come to be known as "touchy-feely" approaches to composition such as Elbow's and Murray's, which are rooted in the ideas of trust and community, caring and connecting. That is not to say that the feminist writing teacher rejects scientifically-based theories; rather, the "feminist struggle[s] to change the overly rational premises of male-dominated social relations and institutions and to incorporate priorities appreciative of human needs and feelings" (Schniedewind 179).

Like the feminist literary critic Annette Kolodny describes, she adopts a "pluralist" view, recognizing that strategies "are more or less appropriate," "more or less rich," not simply right and wrong (160). Constant, however, in feminist pedagogy are the concerns with community and process. At the "core" of feminist pedagogy, as Shrewsbury notes, is "a re-imaging of the classroom as a community of learners where there is both autonomy of self and mutuality with others" (10). Harris et al. define a feminist pedagogy as one which is shaped by (1) Interaction, Cooperation and Trust; (2) Connected, Holistic Thought; (3) Intuition and Insight; (4) Joining Feeling and Thinking; and (5) Social Responsibility (303-305). It is my contention that feminist theories and observations about the way people learn and develop provide compelling reasons to adopt a feminist pedagogy in the writing classroom, a pedagogy characterized by its insistence on community and its concern with process.

The traditional, product-centered composition class may be characterized by its reliance upon form rather than substance, upon the instructor rather than the students, upon authority rather than experience. In such a classroom, writing assignments are designed by the teacher according to his perceptions of what the students should write about. The teacher is the perceived audience for writing, indeed the real and only audience, and since he will be grading the writing, students learn very quickly to stifle whatever

creative impulses they may be experiencing in order to give the teacher what he wants. But of course they fail miserably because such a paradigm prevents the making of meaning. Their papers are returned, "bloodied up" as it were, and the writers, lacking confidence in the first place and having little stake in their texts, put them away or throw them away and go on to make the same mistakes in the next dictated assignment. As Caywood and Overing have argued:

> The model of writing as product is inherently authoritarian. The act of writing becomes a suppressed and private activity of the self which is eventually divorced from the product made public. As a result: certain forms of discourse and language are privileged: the expository essay is valued over the exploratory; clear evocation of a thesis preferred to a more organic exploration of a topic; the impersonal, rational voice ranked more highly than the intimate, subjective one. The valuing of one form over another requires that the teacher be a judge, imposing a hierarchy of learned aesthetic values, gathered from ideal texts, upon the student text (xii)

Such a pedagogy is predicated upon a male model of intellectual development whereby students are likened to "empty vessels" waiting to be filled with knowledge, or "tabula rasa," blank minds waiting to be inscribed. Paulo Freire in Pedagogy of the Oppressed describes this traditional paradigm of education in terms of banking. The teacher's job is "to 'fill' the students by making deposits of information which the teacher considers to constitute true knowledge" (63). The student's role is to store the deposits:

> The banking concept distinguishes two stages in the action of the educator. During the first, he cognizes a cognizable object while he prepares his lessons in his study or his laboratory; during the second, he expounds to his students about that object. The students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher. Nor do the students practice any act of cognition, since the object towards which that act should be directed is the property of the teacher (67-68).

Freire, too, uses the metaphor of the scientist to describe the traditional teacher, a metaphor which recalls Showalter's literary critic who adopts a "science" of the text to

demonstrate that his work is "as manly and aggressive as nuclear physics" (140).

Consider this banker/scientist teacher in the classroom. He tells his students how to write and then seems confident that the knowledge and truth he is spewing forth are being duly deposited, and that when his students sit down to write they will be able to make the appropriate withdrawals to insure successfully written products. When this fails to happen, he doesn't question his own behavior; he blames the students. "These students shouldn't even be in college" he says; or "They must not have been paying attention." When, on the other hand, his students do succeed, they succeed because they have managed to give back to him what he "deposited" in them to begin with--not because they have learned to make meaning, but because they have "got" his meaning.

Bolker relates the case of two female students who achieved high grades on their compositions but expressed a "sense of nonownership and of disappointment at not being able to make [themselves] heard" (906). They had learned to write papers, to make the appropriate withdrawals from the bank, but they had not learned to write, "to be able to communicate by expressing their own ideas, feelings, and voices on paper" (906). These students discover critical reasoning as "'how They [the upper-case "T" symbolizing authority--here, the professors] want us to think,' how

students must think in order to win the academic game" (Belenky et al. 101). Gilligan (1982) and Belenky et al. (1986) describe this way of thinking as "separate" knowing.

For separate knowers, "knowledge implies separation from the object and mastery over it," as opposed to "understanding [which] involves intimacy and equality between self and object," or "connected" knowing (Belenky et al. 101). The separate knower as a separate teacher is, like the scientist, elevated above the realm of ordinary human beings. What he says must be "true" because he has said it. He presents to his students only the products of his thinking, hiding from them the process of gestation, creating the impression that only professors can formulate theories and that such accomplishments are unattainable by the multitude (Belenky et al. 215). The "separate" writing teacher may share his writing with the class but would never risk sharing his rough drafts, or demonstrating the error-ridden process through which the polished product came into being. The "connected" teacher, on the other hand, writes <u>with</u> her students and exhibits the difficulty that even a trained professional has in wrestling words onto the page. Or a connected teacher might share with students the various rough drafts she composed before she accomplished the final polished product. Such a teacher allows her students to see the imperfections in her thinking and writing process and thereby enables them to realize that finely turned out products are the result of

hard work and struggle, not divine inspiration.

I have been referring, throughout my argument, to the banker/scientist, separate and traditional teacher as "he." But none of these terms is gender specific. Indeed, the student-centered classrooms of Peter Elbow, James Moffet, and Donald Murray demonstrate quite the opposite of the "banking" mode. And women as well as men are products of the male-created educational system; women as well as men may be bankers/scientists. Hence, while we cannot label the banking teacher as male, we can posit that his opposite is, nevertheless, feminist. We refer here to the "mid-wife" teacher of Women's Ways of Knowing: "While the bankers deposit knowledge in the learner's head, the mid-wives draw it out. They assist the students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it" (217).

The pedagogy of the mid-wife teacher is the pedagogy of the feminist defined earlier who "stresses experience as a basic part of learning." She views knowledge as a "process rather than a product." She acknowledges the importance of "respecting one's experiences and feelings," and she "advocates developing an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, support, and nurturance in the classroom" (Harris et al. 302-3).

In the composition classroom the mid-wife/feminist strives to establish a community. She knows that writers

cannot be expected to make meaning in an atmosphere of negative criticism and distrust. Thus students and teacher alike sit in a circle, which underlines connection; rather than in rows, which enforce separation. The non-hierarchical, egalitarian, and uniquely feminine nature of the circle disallows the monolithic control of the teacher and promotes an honesty and trust among members of the community who must face each other as they speak. One student put it this way: "The setting of the classroom, with everyone in a circle, is really helpful because you can hear and see everyone's insights."

Peer-group work is another common format of feminist pedagogy. Like the circular arrangement, it, too, furthers the sense of community and provides the ideal setting for interaction, collaboration, and trust-building. Daumer and Runzo see the feminist composition teacher as one who "attempts to meet students on their own grounds...[who] allow[s] for self-sponsored writing by encouraging students to interact as much with each other as with the instructor" (49). The writing classroom becomes a group workshop where students read each other their work and solicit meaningful response from other members of the community. The midwife moves among the groups to monitor discussions and sometimes model appropriate responses, being careful not to dominate a group discussion. Student writers thus have a real forum for their ideas and can test them against the perceptions of

others. Knowing that they have a real audience, knowing that their peers will see their work, not just the teacher, is an invaluable motivating principle.

The midwife/feminist teacher does not lecture about how or what to write. Instead she allows students to write about what is meaningful to them. She understands that the teacher can facilitate the students' ability to make meaning but cannot make their meaning for them. She knows that the learning environment must foster growth, risk-taking, and community among students.

In such a classroom the goal of each individual to become a better writer is a goal shared by the group. As Donald Murray describes: "The community of writers instinctively understands that each piece of writing is trying to work its way toward a meaning. The community wants to help the writer help the piece of writing find its own meaning" (15). In this atmosphere of trust, collaboration, and social responsibility every writer who commits herself to the community succeeds. Every writer finds her/his own voice and becomes a "connected" knower.

Consider the case of Susan, an eighteen-year-old in my Basic Writing Class. Early in the term students engaged in a values clarification exercise which describes the plight of a disobedient wife, the Baroness, who leaves the castle against her husband's wishes and unbeknownst to him meets her secret lover. When she returns she is prevented from crossing the

drawbridge by a madman wielding an ax who threatens to murder her. Rather than risk her husband's wrath if he returns and finds that she has disobeyed him, she crosses the bridge and is slain by the madman.

Students were asked to rank order a number of characters involved in the story in terms of their responsibility for the Baroness's death. Then they were asked to write a brief paragraph explaining the reasons for their rank order. Afterwards, the entire class discussed the exercise and members shared their views. Finally, students wrote another paragraph explaining any change in attitude or defending even further their original choices.

Susan wrote in her first paragraph that the Baroness was most responsible: "She was told not to leave in the first place and she should of [sic] never been having an affair." After the class discussion, however, in which a few other women students defended the Baroness, Susan wrote: "This is the first time I ever had an assignment like this. I never had to figure out who I thought was responsible for a certain action. Usually when I do an assignment there is a right or wrong answer. I feel this baroness was wrong for having an affair but she should of [sic] never gotten killed for it...."

Susan's first response demonstrates separate knowing, her view of truth as fixed, her need to give the "right" answer as opposed to an answer which corresponds to her

feeling about the situation and her experience as a woman. Her second response, after the interaction with the community and her recognition that there is no "right" answer, demonstrates connected knowing, a view of "truth" as relative and contextual, her surprise that her opinion could be valued, and her willingness to explain the context of her decision. "Men sometimes feel," she writes "like they control their wives and their [sic] supposed to do and say whatever they are told. I think that is totally wrong. Women are people too and we have minds of our own and we decide what to do and when to do it. I think men treat women like that just so they could feel good about themselves. They feel like they have power of the marriage. I think men who feel this way do not deserve to be married." The second writing is far superior to the first: it is more than three times as long, the ideas are developed and supported, and the feelings expressed in it are genuine. When Susan realized that the assigned writing did not require her to play the academic game of giving "Them" what "They" want, she was able to convey her real thoughts, and her writing became much more effective. We shudder to think of the students who will never be asked to write a second time, or whose ideas will never be shared with a community, or whose opinions will always be judged as "right or wrong." The banker/scientist mode of educating is largely responsible for the disenfranchisement of the female learner in the academy.

The feminist/midwife model, on the other hand, provides hope for the future and spells out an agenda for the twenty-first century based on trust, cooperation, and social responsibility. It is a model which emphasizes process rather than product, collaboration rather than debate, caring rather than judging, understanding rather than knowledge, and connection rather than separation. The global community will be best served by the modeling of the community ethic in the classroom through a process-centered feminist pedagogy. As Elizabeth Flynn wrote in 1988: "The emerging field of composition studies could be described as a feminization of our previous conceptions of how writers write and how writing should be taught" (112).

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